DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 574 EA 021 013

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TITLE Poor Parents, Teachers, and the Schools: Comments about Practice, Policy, and Research.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Relations; *Economically Disadvantaged; Elementary Education; *Low Income Groups; *Parent Participation; Social Stratification; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS Massachusetts (Boston); New York (New York)

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that family and community involvement in education is linked to healthy child development and to children's academic and social success in school. Family participation can also enhance adult personal development and empowerment, aid community problem-solving through collaboration, and advance the prospects for a more democratic and equitable society. Despite all these benefits, many American public schools (including most surban schools) allow social class barriers to inhibit good relationships with the families and communities they serve. Both U.S. and Western European educators are aware that improved connections are needed to reduce the high levels of academic and social failure among poor urban children. This paper describes a Schools Reaching Out project at two elementary schools in Boston and New York City that attempts to address these problems. Based on the research of James Comer, Joyce Epstein, Vire Bronfenbrenner, Paul Seeley, and the author's previous studies in Boston, Portugal, and Liverpool, the project: has established a parent center in each school, features activities to increase the family's "cultural capital," stresses parent involvement in decision-making at school, and fosters teacher-generated guidance and materials for home instruction by parents. Various concerns about attitudes and organizational change realities are addressed, and a research agenda focused on success for all children, teacher development, and community-parent contributions to school change is outlined. (MLH)

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POOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND THE SCHOOLS
Comments about Practice, Policy, and Research

A paper prepared by Don Davies, President, Institute for Responsive Education and Professor of Education, Boston University, for the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco, "Parents and the Public Schools," Tuesday, March 28, 1989.

For 15 years at the Institute for Responsive Education we have been studying the relationships between schools, families, and communities. We are advocates as well as researchers. We believe that when families and communities have strong connections with schools everyone benefits -- children, families, teachers, schools, communities, and our democratic society.

Benefits of School/Family/Community Linkages

Scores of studies by competent researchers in this country and overseas over the past two decades have confirmed these benefits. We know that family and community involvement is linked to healthy child development and to academic and social success of children in school.

We know that family involvement in education can contribute to the personal development and empowerment of the adults involved and can lead an increased appreciation of their important roles, strengthened social networks improved, access to information and materials, a better sense of personal efficacy, and heightened motivation to continue their own education.

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We know that increased parent and community involvement can bring multiple benefits to teachers and schools: The

Teachers' work can become more manageable; parents who are involved have more positive views of the teacher and the school; and parents and others who participate are likely to be more supportive of the schools.

Increased linkages between school and community have been shown to have multiple positive results: increased access to school resources and facilities, cost-saving and improved services through collaboration; increased capacity to solve community problems; and real community pride.

Parent and citizen participation in the schools also can contribute to advancing the prospects of a more democratic and equitable society. For example, increased opportunities for participation in school decision-making builds the skills that lead to individual and collective empowerment, important ingredients for effective citizen action in all arenas of civic life.

BARRIERS TO GAINING THE BENEFITS

Despite all of these benefits many American public schools including most urban schools -- have weak connections with the families and communities they serve. Most have had a tradition of isolation. We also know that low-income families and communities are often less able to realize these important benefits than other families and communities. There are serious social class barriers which inhibit good relationships between schools and communities. In my recent interviews study in Boston, Liverpool, and Portugal nearly all of the low-income parents interviewed had

few or no connections with their children's school, except occasional negative messages when a child is in trouble.

However, there appears to be an increased awareness on the part of educators and policymakers in this country and in Western Europe that improved connections are needed if we are going to be able to reduce the high levels of academic and social failure among poor children in urban schools today. More educators and political and corporate leaders are acknowledging that these high rates of failure amount to a major national crisis -- a social, economic, and political peril of great importance. There is a great danger in continuing to have a two-tiered society: one tier affluent, generally well-educated and optimistic; the other poor, increasing isolated, badly educated, and despairing.

The schools can't solve these problems alone; neither can low-income families. Schools and families both need each other and they need other community resources and support. Over the past few years, there have been many useful studies and reports that point to ways that progress can be made. At the Institute, we have looked hard at the research and at the projects and efforts in many schools in cities and other countries, and have constructed a project which we call Schools Reaching Out. I believe that the ideas which guide this project, its activities, and the research that we are doing over the next year and a half may be useful to other schools to policymakers and to other researchers.

The Schools Reaching Out Project

The project has two parts:

* Two elementary schools -- the David A. Ellis School in Roxbury in Boston and P.S. 111 on West 53rd Street in Manhattan in New York's Community District 2 -- that are trying a wide variety of old and new approaches to involving families and the community in order to improve the effectiveness of the school.

* Linked with the two schools is a 19 member National Commission, including some well-known researchers and educators. This group oversees the effort, gives it some credibility, and will gain national attention to the need for stronger, positive connections between schools, families, and communities.

We have obtained two years of funding from five foundations -- John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur, Leon Lowenstein, JM, Aaron Diamond, and the Boston Globe foundation. The schools began their work in October -- a major five part research and evaluation plan will begin this spring -- and the project will culminate with a national conference and several reports in May of 1990.

In this project, we seek to answer these questions: Can practitioners use research to change their ways of thinking and working in a complex arena such as school-family relations? Can better connections between urban schools, low - income families, and communities help to increase the academic and social success of all children?

We may have some beginnings of answers to these questions in 18 months. I want to identify some of the elements of the project by telling you about the main intellectual roots and themes of the effort and to suggest concerns and three policy objectives that might be of some

interest to this Committee.

Research Links to Practice

James Comer

First among the intellectual roots is the work of James Comer and his colleagues at the Child Study Center at Yale and in the Baldwin and King Schools in New Haven. Comer has demonstrated that to improve urban schools it is not enough to aim only at the intellectual and academic development of children -- that their social, emotional, physical development are inescapably linked to the intellectual. Comer's mental health team approach involves teachers, specialists, parents, and community agencies. Comer's work has produced a tested process model which leads to both a new curriculum and a new school climate all to motivate at-risk children to achieve at a much higher level both socially and academically.

I see Comer's model as stressing a wide variety of forms of parent involvement -- in the school and at home -- but none of them are ends in themselves, all of them are geared to increasing social and academic success of children. For our Schools Reaching Out project -- we have drawn on Comer's work for three different features:

* The schools are seeking to draw in social service and mental health services from the community to help both the children and the families.

* The program focuses on parent activities both outside of the school and in the school -- using paraprofessional

parent support workers or home visitors to go to homes to provide parent education, support, and information.

* The program fosters a wide variety of styles and timing for parent and community involvement and trying to discover the links between all of these and the social and academic success of children.

Joyce Epstein

A second important intellectual debt is to Joyce Epstein's research which has confirmed the clear achievement advantages for children whose parents are actively involved in supporting the teacher's instructional goals and the clear advantages for teachers who actively seek parent involvement and support.

Epstein's studies and her emerging theory stress the key role of classroom teachers in school links with families. She has also recognized how important it is to give teachers specific, practical help in how to draw parents in to the learning process.

Three important parts of Schools Reaching Out project borrow from Epstein's work:

* In each school there is a Key Teacher, a classroom teacher from that school who has been freed from teaching for two years -- paid by the school district -- to be a specialist in school/community relationships and to work full-time making linkages with families and with other community agencies.

* Project funds are available to support classroom teachers' efforts to develop materials which can be used at home to support the instructional goals of the teacher. In this part of the project we also build on the work of Dorothy Rich and the Home and School Institute, the pioneers in developing plans and materials to help parents become more effective as teachers of their own children.

* The project provides funds for teacher training and staff development activities -- including trips to other schools, workshops, and courses -- to help teachers develop skills, attitudes, and materials and most importantly new mind-sets about shared responsibility for teaching and learning.

We have adopted Joyce Epstein's idea that teachers must be the main carriers of a more positive connections between schools and families and her multi-part typology of parent activities.

Following Epstein's typology, the Schools Reaching Out project's activities can be divided into five types:

* school support for families
* family support for schools and teachers
* school-family communication
* activities to assist parents to help their own children at home
* parent participation in decision-making about school issues, problems, and programs.

My own work over the past few years leads me to conclude that these five types of activities are interrelated and are either mutually supportive or mutually destructive.

Vire Bronfenbrenner and Moncrieff Cochran

Another vital intellectual source of our effort is the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner and Moncrieff Cochran at Cornell University who have developed and tested an ecological theory to explain the systemic relationships that exist in the child's world. They see the child as being a part of a complex set of institutions -- family, neighborhood, community, school, church, social service agency, city, state -- each influencing the children and all interconnected.

The problem for poor children is that these connections are usually not very good and we expect them and their families to negotiate and navigate among these differences in ways that would befuddle a highly paid lawyer.

Bronfenbrenner and Cochran have tested their theories in a large-scale study of parent support interventions with poor and working-class families in Syracuse, New York using home visitors and parent support clusters. Their interventions have empowerment as their core purpose and are based on the idea that all families have strengths as well as problems and that cultural diversity can be a resource, not a "problem" to be solved or a disease to be "cured."

These interventions were shown to be effective in terms of parent motivation about learning, the creation of

working support networks, and child rearing competence. From Bronfenbrenner and Cochran, we have borrowed for our project the ecological perspective which doesn't allow us to blame any single part of the child's world, which rejects the deficit model of poor children and families, and which puts a high premium on building working connections between and among the various institutions. Of central importance to our project are the parent support workers, a major effort to tap and make working arrangements with other health and social service agencies, and an emphasis on building positive intercultural awareness on the part of teachers and parents.

David Seeley

We also owe a major intellectual debt to David Seeley, who in his book Education Through Partnership and many other articles and speeches calls for a new vision of education in which responsibility for the development of all children is shared by school, students, family, and community. Seeley asserts that the key missing elements in efforts for urban reform are a real commitment to the fact that all children can succeed and the political will to act on this commitment.

A major focus on the research in our project will be to try to see how connections are made between families, schools, and communities that appear to contribute to the objective of success for all children. However, our project is not able to make an important contribution to building the political commitment necessary to provide the policies and

resources needed to achieve such a far reaching objective as success for all children. Outside pressure and support will be needed. I will comment briefly about the policy implications of this at the close of this paper.

IRE Study in Boston, Portugal, and Liverpool

The Schools Reaching Out project also draws directly on my own study in Liverpool, Boston, and Portugal, based on about 350 interviews with low-income parents and teachers to find out about the relationships between low-income parents and schools and teacher attitudes about socially marginal families and parent attitudes about teachers and schools. The conclusion that I report in this paper are drawn directly from the data gathered in about eleven sites in Portugal, but the results in all three countries were remarkably similar. Some of the major impressions:

1. The fact that most of the low income parents and little or no contact with the school and what communication there is negative. Most of the parents hear from teachers and school officials only when their child is in trouble.

2. Low-income parents don't consider themselves hard-to-reach. They will come to the school when asked for a good reason, but by and large they don't come on their own, and many -- perhaps most -- carry bad memories of schools and talk about being intimidated by teachers and administrators. Most say they simply don't like to go to a school.

2. Most teachers and administrative committee members believe that many parents are hard-to-reach and cite as the reasons the characteristics of the parents, the social or economic conditions in their communities, or the fact that they are tired and have little time.

3. Teachers have a deficit view of low-income families and their communities. They tend to believe that low-income people do not value education highly or that they have little to offer to the education of their own children.

This exploratory work supports the results of the research of sociologists such as Warner and Lareau. Lareau's study in a middle-class and a working-class school in California underlines the cultural capital theory which links social class with styles and quantity of parent involvement in the school.

The theme of negative expectations was clear. One Portuguese teacher said, "As soon as I saw the mother, I knew that boy would have trouble in school. "Another said, "We do the best we can. But what can you expect of these children? Look at the homes they come from."

4. Many low-income parents have similarly low expectations for themselves and for their children -- although they almost uniformly expressed strong interest in their child's education. Most doubt their ability to become effectively involved in their own children's education. Many said they would like to learn more about how to help.

5. A large majority of the low-income parents are satisfied with the schools, even when their children are doing very badly in it.

6. Few teachers or parents expressed any interest in the potential role of schools to overcome for individual children or groups of children the social and economic inequities of the society. There were no comments at all from either parents or teachers that connected schools, schooling, or teachers to any broad national social or economic goals such as extending the benefits of social justice and democratic participation to all segments of the society.

We have drawn on some of these results in developing some of the elements of the School Reaching Out project. Specifically:

* Recognizing that it is important to give parents a sense of ownership and welcome, we have in each school a parent center -- a converted classroom -- which is seen by the

parents as theirs and is a location for informal social gatherings as well as workshops and courses.

* We emphasize activities -- through the parent support workers at home, workshops in the school, and trips -- to increase the "cultural capital" of the family at least in a small way and to build self-esteem and self-confidence.
* To increase the sense of ownership and self-worth, we are we are stressing the involvement of parents in decision-making in the school -- including the steering committee that has responsibility for the Schools Reaching Out project, parent associations, and the school improvement council in each school. These groups are potentially important as mechanisms which make possible parent participation in planning, problem solving, and setting policies. We realize that these groups often fall far short of their promise, but the potential is there.
* The project is trying to foster the interest of teachers in providing guidance and materials for parents to help their own children at home.

In another year and a half we will be able to report on how some of these intellectual roots have flowered in practice in two urban schools.

Three Concerns

As I review the current literature and practices across the country, reassess my own three-country study, look at the promising work being done in the two schools in the IRE

project, and note how fashionable the topic of school-community-family relationships has become, I have several concerns which have policy implications, as well as implications for future research. I want to mention just three of these.

1. The first is the tendency in some quarters to trivialize parent involvement, to see it as something which is very "nice," but not very significant in the "big world of school reform." There is some tendency to think of parent participation as a series of events, meetings, and activities and to overstress the traditional forms of involvement -- attending meetings, cultural and social events planned by the school, and informational workshops for parents.

The connections between families, schools, and communities are not yet seen as vitally related to the premier social task of breaking the link between poverty and social and academic failure for so many poor children, the task of reforming the education process so that all children can achieve success (not just some of them).

My nightmare is that those of us who are advocates of parent involvement and citizen participation will succeed too well and see an upswell of interest, events, projects, and talk about parents, parent choice, family support, and parent involvement -- an encouraging array of books, reports, and activities in more and more schools -- and still find that a substantial proportion -- perhaps 25 or 30 or 35 percent of

our children are failing and leaving school ill-prepared for socially productive lives, for continued education, for work, or for citizenship.

The point is that parent involvement should not be viewed in any way other than as one of many needed connections between schools, families, and communities which might contribute to social and academic success for all children.

All of these connections should be viewed only as one part of an overall effort to reform educational structures and attitudes -- not as ends in themselves.

My second concern is about the realities of organizational change. In projects such as ours and many others, -- we build high expectations on the part of policymakers, foundation officials, teachers, and administrators for change, reform, and dramatic results. Yet, yet we know how difficult organizational change is -- in any organization and especially in urban schools plagued as they often are by the poor conditions, skepticism about the possibility that new ideas will work, bureaucratic and financial constraints, traditions that work against collegial planning and problem solving, and suspicion about research and researchers and "change agents" from the outside.

The expectations are high, but the realities work against change at the same time that they dramatize the need for it. This is a dilemma, a contradiction, and a warning to policymakers as well as to educators.

My third concern flows directly from the second. In this time when collaboration and partnerships and from-the-bottom-up reform efforts are being touted all around -- such as in our Schools Reaching Out project, it is important to remember that outside pressures and demands are needed if social or organizational change is to occur and if education is to win any great leapforward in the public's willingness to pay a higher bill. Without pressure from the outside -- in the form of laws, mandates, and citizen organizations demanding change, and parent and citizen protests of inadequate school results -- organizations like schools are not likely to be able to overcome the built-in inertia that defeats change. Without organized public dissatisfaction, politicians are unlikely to make substantial shifts in the allocation of public resources. This points to the need for a pincer movement -- work inside schools such as our Schools Reaching Our project and work outside the schools by grassroots parent and community organizations to press for school reform and improved results. The outside pincer has to be citizen-initiated and citizen-controlled, not dependent on the support or financing of school officials.

Research Agenda

We are about to initiate a major research program based on the Schools Reaching Out project and an examination of four other projects with related objectives. With a research team of about eight people we are focusing five topics. I will comment very briefly about each.

1) Success for All Children

We want to look for the structures, practices, behaviors, and mindsets (understandings, predispositions, or ways of viewing the world) that appear to be associated with possible increases in the social or academic achievement of children. Some of the main questions we hope to study are: How do various actors and agencies define academic and social success, either in what they say or do or in documents? What are the explicit or implicit views or policies about whether all children can be expected to succeed? What are seen as the main barriers or factors that foster success? What are the perceptions of the relevant actors about roles and duties of each as related to student success?

How do the several projects (Schools Reaching Out and the others we examine) define and/or talk about academic and social success? What are the premises that seem to be present in these diverse projects? What are the most important common learnings across the several projects (rules, procedures, indicators, measures) ? What components found in two or more sites appear to be most connected to student academic and social success?

How are the connections between student learining and success and social learning success and various of parent participation actually viewed (if at all) by parents, teachers, principals, school specialists, and community agency personnel?

How are the connections that appear to affect results

(or seem to informed observers to be likely to affect results) actually made? What kind of parent involvement or community linkages can be expected to produce what kinds of results? How do teachers and other school staff come to understand families and use family strengths to help children achieve? How do parents come to better understand the schools and use part of their energies and home environment to help children succeed? What appear to be the critical processes to starting and maintaining school/family/community connections?

What tangible evidence is there that might support the opinions of the relevant parties about the connections between various forms of parent/community involvement and academic and social results?

What are the indicators used for measuring results? If there isn't substantial hard evidence, what kinds of indicators are acceptable? How can such evidence be obtained?

Is there expressed interest in a "new model" of roles and relationships that is evolving as people work together to develop these relationships? What are seen to be the barriers to making a "profound shift" toward concepts such as "shared responsibility for the development of children?"

2) TEACHER ROLES AND DEVELOPMENT

A teacher-as-researcher approach will be the main feature of the work on this topic, with a teacher research team being formed in each of the two Schools Reaching Out sites.

Our basic question will be (1) how teachers start and maintain connections with families and other community resources and (2) what processes seem to work to overcome the barriers usually identified to teachers' "reaching out."

The main questions we will explore are: What is it in the structure of the school that enables or impedes teachers to reach out to form new relationships with families or other parts of the community.

What stresses, concerns, anxieties do teachers express or exhibit related to new activities or roles for low-income parents, or for other community agencies and institutions?

How do other teachers, administrators, and the teachers union provide support or assistance in overcoming these stresses, anxieties, and concerns?

What do teachers believe are the strengths and weaknesses of the various groups or categories of parents whose children are in the school and about the communities they are from? How can they find out about the strengths of families and communities represented in their classes?

What roles do they believe these low-income families play or should play in the development and learning of their own children? Do teachers see serious roles conflicts

between themselves and parents?

What do teachers believe about what different attitudes, skills, or knowledge they should have in order to make more useful connections with urban parents and/or other parts of the community?

What critical skills, attitudes, or knowledge do teachers have (or think they should have) to "reach out?" How do they obtain these?

What approaches to staff development appear to be linked to teachers' more positive "reaching out?" What seem to be real connections between interventions of various kinds and results in terms of teacher behavior?

How do other teachers perceive and relate to those teachers designated as parent/community specialists?

How do these special teachers relate to other specialized staff and to the principal or other administrators? What roles confusions or tensions are there? How are these resolved?

3) FAMILY AND COMMUNITY AND THE SCHOOL

We believe that racial/ethnic/social class factors are of central importance in the dynamics of relationships between low-income children, their families, their communities and their schools. We assert that what happens or doesn't happen inside the school in a project such as this must be viewed in the context of the family and community background of the schools' parents and seen through their eyes. We also believe that paents must be viewed as being a

part of neighborhoods and communities and that Schools Reaching Out encompasses community resources not just parent resources.

We intend to develop and test an approach which we call a "community portrait," using an action research team of parents and teachers in each of the two sites.

In this part of the study, the process is even more important than the results -- as the approach may be replicable as a means of developing school, family, community connections and fostering effective and sensitive use by schools of knowledge about family and community strengths and problems.

Some of the important questions here are these: What can be learned (and how) about the strengths and problems of the communities and school serves?

What are the most important elements of a community portrait -- if it is to have a positive influence on school practices and programs? How can the needed data be gathered and communicated to the school?

What happens when a school seeks to learn about family and community strengths and problems and to use this information for the benefit of children in the school?

What are the educational, health, cultural, and social service resources in the community? How are links with these begun, by whom, with what results? Which resources seem to be most useful? At what levels should links be established?

In what ways is the community redefined as individuals

gain knowledge and understanding of its cultures and

How does the community portraiture process itself (a collaborative parent-teacher effort to describe a community) enhance the development of school, family, community understandings and the capacities of the relevant parties to communicate and work toward more mutually supportive goals?

4) THIRD-PARTY INTERVENTIONS AND SCHOOL CHANGE

What happens when a project such as Schools Reaching Out (or other similar projects) is introduced from the outside by a third party? This question is of central importance, we believe, to sponsoring third-party organizations such as IRE and to funding sources (including state and federal policymakers). This topic is the closest we come to a project evaluation as it focuses on the project as a third-party intervention rather than on the broad topic of school change.

Some of the questions we will explore are these: What happens when a third party introduces a project such as this into a school?

What factors influence what happens: the subject matter or purposes of the intervention, the auspices of the intervention, school district role, nature and sources of funding, nature of research and evaluation, project design, the amount of structure, flexibility or freedom provided, decision-making and governance structures, the length or timing of the intervention, whether or not the intervention is a multi-site project, nature and forms of technical

assistance provided, personality or political factors within the school or in the third-party intervener agency, etc.?

How can a third party best facilitate the development of processes and programs to link parents and schools? What skills and attitudes appear to be needed by the third-party agent?

What specific behaviors build infra-structures likely to continue after the intervention period has passed?

5) THE IMPACT OF POLICY ON SCHOOL/PARENT/COMMUNITY RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE FROM THE SCHOOL SITE

Since one of the projects's purposes is to influence policymakers we must be concerned about what differences policies of various kinds make (by policies we mean, for example, legislation, resolutions and statements by official bodies, budget allocations, executive agency initiatives, rules, regulations, and union contracts). We intend to consider policies at three levels: local, state, and federal, as they are seen from and impact the school site.

We will look at the effects of the federal, state, and local policies on local behavior, practices, attitudes, and outcomes. Examples are the Opportunity School and school improvement initiatives in Massachusetts and the CSIP program in New York State, the new Chapter 1 and other Federal initiatives, and the effects of a new pupil assignment and parent choice plan in Boston.

Some possible questions we will explore will be: What impact do union contracts or union rules, school

district rules and requirements have on what aspects of school like relevant to this project?

What impact do statements or positions of school district or school board officials have? What impact does local budget regulations and timing have?

What private or public policies seem to affect the relationships between the schools and external community agencies and resources (e.g. businesses, social agencies)?

Do state and federal programs and funds play a tangible, significant role in the dynamics of a third-party, non governmental intervention?

Are there policy characteristics or conditions that appear to have a fostering or an inhibiting affect on parents, teachers, administrators, community agencies which seek to cooperate with the schools?

What policy impact commonalities are there across the Schools Reaching Out and other project sites?

The availability of funds and time will determine the level of effort that is possible on this topic. But, at a minimum, we will engage a person to work with project director to review project data and conduct a small number of site interviews during the final year of the project in order to produce a report on this topic. (Approximately 15 person day).

The Schools Reaching Out project has a wide variety of goals relating to many different levels of practice, policy, and research, and the possible connections between these

levels. If the project is to be significant, it will be because it succeeds in making these connections, showing how research can influence practice and policy, and how practice and the perspectives or practitioners can influence both policy and research.